

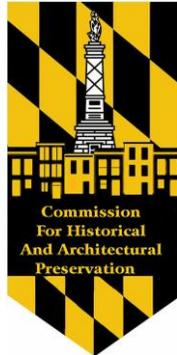
**The Commission for Historical and  
Architectural Preservation**

**Landmark Designation Report**



**City Hall Rotunda – Public Interior**

100 N. Holliday St  
Baltimore, Maryland



COMMISSION FOR HISTORICAL & ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION

ERIC HOLCOMB, *Executive Director*

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Special thanks to Jeanne Davis, City Hall Curator, for her assistance and information contributed to this report.



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## **Summary**

When it was constructed, the rotunda of City Hall was considered the most striking feature of a very impressive building. The large circular space rises 119 feet to a dome capped with stained glass, comprised of ornately carved marble floors, walls, and balusters, richly colored scagliola, and detailed plasterwork and metal work. The rotunda represents the finest example of interior municipal architecture and artistry in Baltimore, completed by Baltimore artisans, and restored a century later by Baltimore artisans. The rotunda has served as an important civic space for Baltimore for almost 140 years, serving a variety of public municipal functions.

## **Property History**

The elaborate marble structure of Baltimore with its lofty cast-iron dome covers a full city block. It was begun on April 11, 1867 and dedicated on April 28, 1875. The dedication ceremonies were extensively covered in the *Baltimore Sun* and the account celebrated an extremely rare occurrence in the history of the spending of public money - Baltimore's City Hall was completed for a quarter of a million dollars less than the appropriation. "The structure is an ornament to the City and a monument to the honest administration of public affairs. The total cost of the imposing pile, including the ground and its magnificent furniture throughout has been \$2,271,135.65 out of an appropriation of \$2,500,000 leaving a surplus of \$228,864.36." Designed by George A. Frederick, Baltimore's City Hall is an excellent example of the public building style popular after the Civil War. Although smaller in size, it is comparable in quality and style to the old State Department building in Washington, D.C. and the Philadelphia City Hall. Built of white marble from Baltimore County, its cast-iron dome by Wendell Bollman was manufactured in this City by the same firm that did the Capitol dome in Washington. City Hall is a Baltimore City Landmark and is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

When it was constructed, the interior of City Hall was baroque in plan and design, and opulent in detail and furnishings, particularly in spaces such as the City Hall Rotunda, the Council Chambers, and the Mayor's rooms.

The rotunda in City Hall has long served as an important site for local, state, national, and international events, including visits by presidents, a site for important officials to lie in state following their death, including Mayors, city leaders, and even Vice Presidents.<sup>1</sup> It serves as a site for important municipal events and announcements.

## **Architectural Description**

The following description of the rotunda is from the 1878 book, *The City Hall, Baltimore. History of Construction and dedication.*

“Undoubtedly, the most striking feature of the interior is the rotunda, situated in the middle of the centre wing, and by galleries forming the connecting link with the eastern and western corridors on the first, second, and third floors. The plan of the rotunda is, as the name implies, circular, with a diameter of 44 feet at the base and a height of 119 feet and 3 inches to the stained glass light which crowns its dome. In its horizontal divisions it agrees with the heights of the different stories already given. The walls on each floor that form its circumference are divided into eight divisions by enriched pilasters and imposts, with elaborately finished caps, bases, and archivolts. The order of the first story is Roman Doric, of the second Roman Ionic, and of the third — which, commencing upon the top gallery, forms the base of the dome proper — Roman Corinthian; the latter are 4 feet wide across the face and 41 feet 9 inches high. All the above work is composed of Scagliola marble of different varieties, that of the first floor being Tennessee, the second Lisbon, the last Sienna; all are highly polished. The compartments formed by the pilasters are occupied the entering archways, alternating with niches and windows. Above the Corinthian pilasters is a full entablature of the same order, surmounted by a stylobate divided by paneled pedestals from which spring the ribs of the dome over each of the pilasters referred to, the space between the pedestals being filled with enriched balusters.

“The pilasters of the dome of ceiling of the rotunda (which, as also the whole body of the work, is built in brick) are paneled, crowned with appropriate caps, from which spring moulded semi-circular arches and smaller ribs; the latter mitreing with and forming a part of the decoration of the eye of the semi-sphere forming the ceiling referred to. The well, or eye, is 12 feet in diameter, and filled with a rich stained-glass light, divided by circular panels into a central and four surrounding compartments, the first bearing the seal of the city, the latter, emblematic female figures representing Commerce, Agriculture, Manufactures, and the Arts, the intervening space being filled in with classic trophies. On the dust board of the corona at the top of the entablature above referred to, and sufficiently back to be out of observation, is a circle of gaslights, over 200 in number, for the purpose of illuminating the rotunda when desired. They, as also the other lights already referred to, are lit by electricity by the simple turn of a crank. The galleries, of which mention has already been made, have a width of 11 feet 9 inches, entirely constructed of polished marble, and are supported on columns, the first story being Tennessee, of the Doric order; the second story of the Ionic order; and it, as also all the ballance of the work, of white Italian marble. The latter columns are elevated on pedestals, with polished marble balusters forming the rail. Each story has its appropriate entablature, that of the third story being finished with a balustrade, pedestals, and balusters similar to the one just described; the pedestals are surmounted with elaborate bronze posts 5 feet high, supporting coronas of lights. From the wall pilasters on each floor spring brackets to match.

“The openings on the Mansard floor looking into the rotunda also have marble balustrades. The ceilings of the galleries are finished with ribs, and paneled; the floors are tiled in radiating courses, that of the first floor being of Mosaic pattern of variegated marbles, forming eight-pointed stars, which, starting from the centre and overlying each other, finish at the base of the

columns; the whole combination, with its picturesque perspective effect through the arches of the different stories, and the play of light and shade, forming an elegant and finished whole that must be seen to be appreciated.”<sup>2</sup>

The craftsmen and artists that constructed City Hall were all Baltimoreans, and the craftsmanship that is evident in the rotunda was completed by the following firms:

Stained and painted glass of the Rotunda eye – John W. Gernhardt

Brass caps – Baker, Arnold & Co.

Plastering – George W. Starr & Son

Painting, graining, and polishing – Emmart & Quartley

Interior Marble Work – Hugh Sisson

Chandeliers and Gas Fixtures – Cornelius & Sons

Bronzed Posts and Lamps – Robt. Wood & Co.<sup>3</sup>

### **Alterations to the Rotunda**

City Hall has undergone several renovations since its construction.<sup>4</sup> Two of these renovations impacted the rotunda. In a 1928 renovation, the interior of the dome was painted white and a system of indirect lighting was installed in the dome, and an electric light installed above the stained glass. The stained glass had been so blackened by dirt and grime that no one could see the four emblematic figures or the seal of Baltimore. The Chief Engineer of Baltimore, Charles F. Goob, announced that he was “particularly anxious for the public to see the dome and the rotunda, which has been newly decorated and “high-lighted” from the ground floor to the top.”<sup>5</sup>

By the mid-twentieth century, City Hall was showing signs of age. Most concerning was the structural integrity of the cast iron dome, from which an iron ornament plummeted into the Board of Estimates in 1959.<sup>6</sup> During the 1960s and 1970s, the future of City Hall was hotly debated. The question was whether it should be retained and rehabilitated, or demolished and replaced with a modern building, as was typical in other American cities during that period. Following feasibility studies, it was determined that rehabilitation and renovation of City Hall would be the more cost-effective option.<sup>7</sup> In 1974, the City Council unanimously authorized the placement of a bond issue to pay for the restoration of City Hall on the November 1974 ballot. Citizens of Baltimore approved the bond bill.<sup>8</sup>

The preservation and restoration of Baltimore’s City Hall is significant. At the time of its renovation, Baltimore had the only City Hall in the U.S. that had been renovated in order to continue to serve in its original function. Other historic City Halls, such as the one in Boston, had been renovated to serve private uses.<sup>9</sup>

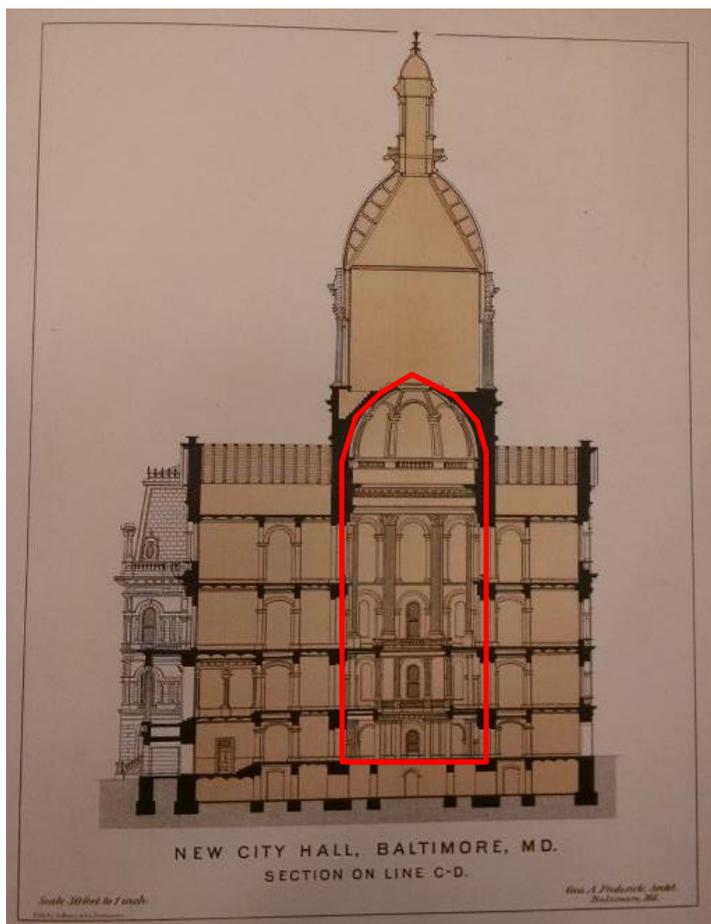
Architectural Heritage, Inc. with offices in Boston and Baltimore, in association with the Baltimore firm of Meyers, D’Aleo, and Patton, Inc. were the architects. Rita St. Clair Associates of Baltimore was hired to do the interior design and restoration.<sup>10</sup> The contractors hired to complete the renovations were Baltimore firms but for two.<sup>11</sup> City Hall was extensively

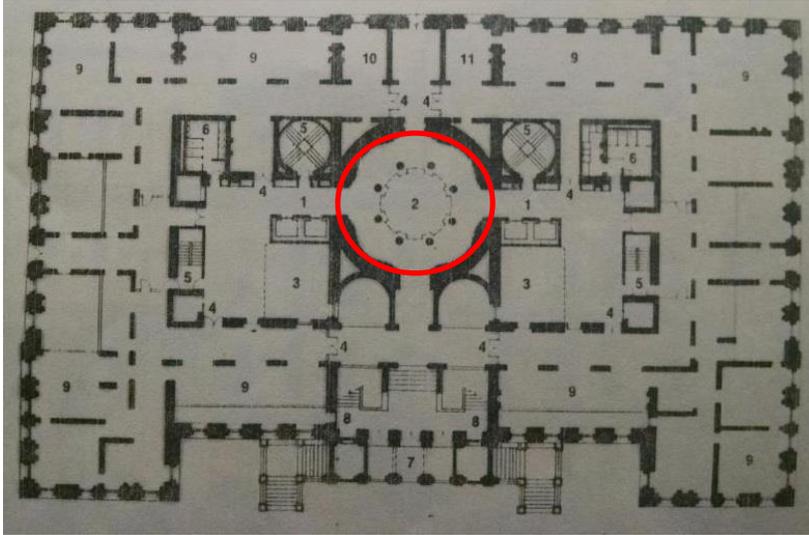
renovated in 1975-1977. The Rotunda, Council Chambers, and Mayor's Ceremonial and cabinet rooms were carefully restored, so much so that Jacques Kelly declared in the *News American* that "Queen Victoria would be right at home in the mayor's ceremonial room."<sup>12</sup> The National Trust for Historic Preservation awarded Mayor Schaefer, Edward Oppel, chief of the Bureau of Construction Management, and Robert Embry, former Housing Commissioner, for the renovation of City Hall.<sup>13</sup>

By the mid-1970s, much of the original features in the interior had been obscured behind additions and alterations, and the rotunda was no exception. The rotunda was painstakingly restored to its original grandeur. The original scagliola pilasters were uncovered under layers of paint, and restored.<sup>14</sup> Scagliola, a faux marble technique that used plaster and marble dust, was very popular in the 1870s because allowed for a wider variety of colors and patterns than real marble, allowing for a richer, more opulent interior.<sup>15</sup> The stained glass in the rotunda had again become so blackened that people were surprised by its rediscovery.

### **Boundaries of the designation**

The designation of City Hall Rotunda includes the circular Rotunda space from the first floor to the crown of the interior dome.





The designation includes these features:

- The volume of space
- The walls, ceilings, and balusters
- The columns and pilasters
- Light fixtures
- Marble floors, including the first floor mosaic floor
- Stained glass
- The affixed plaques and sculptures

### **Staff Recommendation**

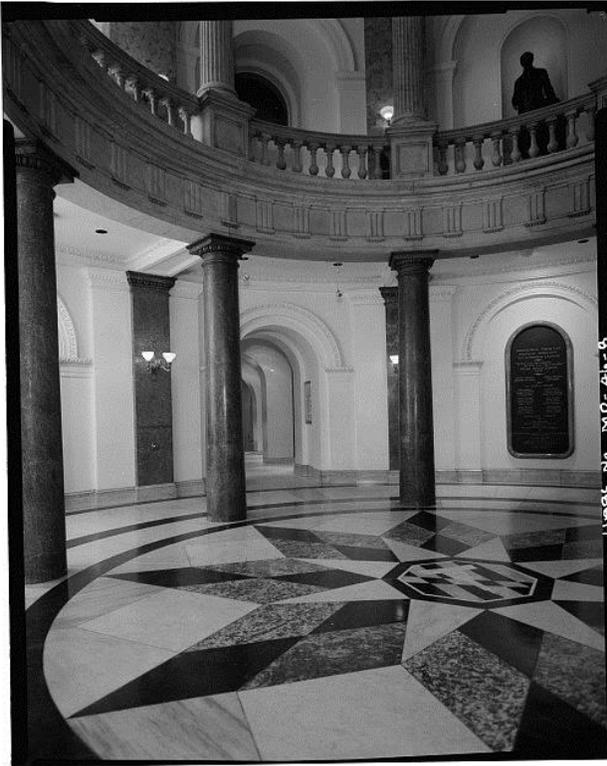
The property meets CHAP Landmark Designation Standards:

B. A Baltimore City Landmark may be a site, structure, landscape, building (or portion thereof), place, work of art, or other object which:

1. Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of Baltimore history;
3. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represents the work of a master, or that possesses high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

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## Images



Historic American Building Survey, 8. rotunda, first and second floors - Baltimore City Hall, Holliday Street, Baltimore, Independent City, MD, HABS MD,4-BALT,123--8, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.



Historic American Building Survey, 9. rotunda, fourth floor- Baltimore City Hall, Holliday Street, Baltimore, Independent City, MD, HABS MD,4-BALT,123--9, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.



Historic American Building Survey, 10. ceiling and skylight above the rotunda - Baltimore City Hall, Holliday Street, Baltimore, Independent City, MD, HABS MD,4-BALT,123—10, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.



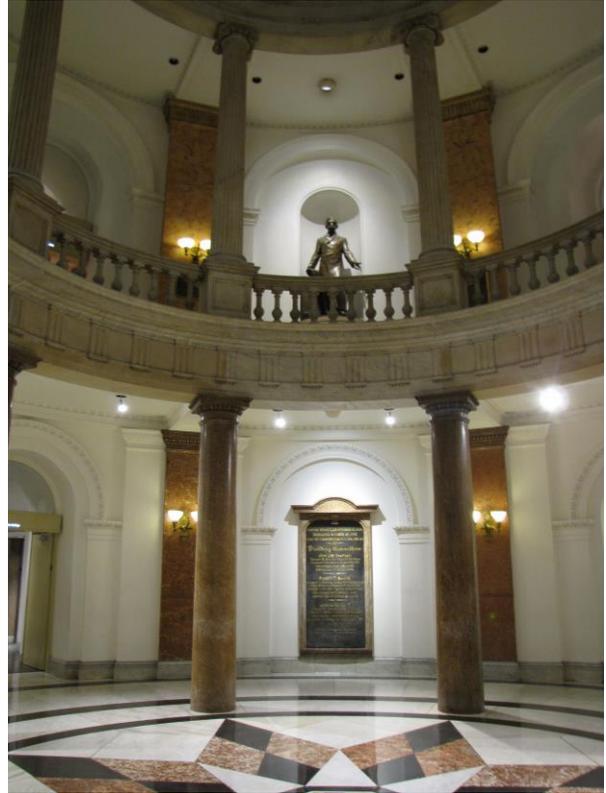
The symbolic figures of Commerce, Agriculture, Manufacturing and the Arts surround the Battle Monument, the seal of Baltimore.



Marble mosaic floor



Marble by Hugh Sisson



Plaque honoring the construction of City Hall.



Memorial tablet to Isaac Emerson.



Brass capital.



Ornate metal lamps, with globes decorated with an etched City Seal.

<sup>1</sup> President Hayes visited the Rotunda in City Hall in 1878, and The first person to lie in state in the rotunda was Vice President Henry Wilson, who died in 1875 during his first term as Vice President for President Ulysses Grant. "President Hayes in Baltimore: HIS VISIT TO THE MARYLAND INSTITUTE ..." Reported for the Baltimore Sun, *The Sun* (1837-1988); Nov 1, 1878; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1988), pg. 1; "THE OBSEQUIES IN BALTIMORE: An Impressive and Elegant Demonstration ..." Reported for the Baltimore Sun, *The Sun* (1837-1988); Nov 27, 1875; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1988), pg. 1

<sup>2</sup> *The City Hall, Baltimore. History of Construction and dedication* (Baltimore: Press of Kelly, Piet, and Company, 1878), pages 135-137.

<sup>3</sup> *The City Hall, Baltimore. History of Construction and dedication*, pages 140-141.

<sup>4</sup> James Dilts "After two years, City Hall is rededicated in style of 1875", *The Sun* (1837-1988); Jan 3, 1977; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1988), pg. A1

<sup>5</sup> "Cleaning Of City Hall Dome Reveals Art Glass Window: Work Of Unknown ..." *The Sun* (1837-1988); Oct 25, 1928; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1988), pg. 28

<sup>6</sup> "Baltimore City Hall: A New Beginning 1875-1976" (City of Baltimore, 1976), pg 3. On file with the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation.

<sup>7</sup> "City Hall: To Save or Not to Save?" *Baltimore Magazine*, March 1974, pg 24-25.

<sup>8</sup> "Baltimore City Hall: A New Beginning 1875-1976" (City of Baltimore, 1976), pg 4. On file with the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Dean Daiss, "America's City Halls" 1981. Accessed through the Library of Congress.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/master/pnp/habshaer/md/md0900/md0957/data/md0957data.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> "Baltimore City Hall: A New Beginning 1875-1976" (City of Baltimore, 1976), pg 4. On file with the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Dean Daiss

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Kelly "City Hall's Inside Story" *The News American* December 5, 1976, Women's World Section 1, pg 1.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas B. Edsall "City Hall renovation cited by national preservation group" *The Sun* (1837-1988); Jun 20, 1978; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1988), pg. C20

<sup>14</sup> "Laud Baltimore" *Progressive Architecture*, Vol. 11, 1977, pages 76-79.

<sup>15</sup> Olga Gueft, "Baltimore City Hall" *Contract Interiors*, October 1977, 78-85.